

BLIND LINGUISTS

by

Victor Block

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IN AN ASSEMBLY room at Georgetown University in Washington, D. C., twelve young men and three women in colorful Russian period costumes thrilled their audience with several popular Cossack and folk tunes sung in perfect Russian. Then they breezed through Anton Chekhov's 40-minute comedy, "The Wedding," without flubbing a syllable.

The enthusiastic cheering of the audience, which included local Russian colony residents, members of Congress and other Government officials, assured the entertainers of their success. Their performance after just six months of Russian language study was considered remarkable—especially since all 15 are blind.

These students were the first in an experimental program at Georgetown University that
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Blind Linguists

It's not charity but real need that motivates this unique program for the talented sightless

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is teaching the blind foreign languages. Since graduating from the two-year course in August, 1962, all have found employment or are continuing their education. Eleven are working with private firms or Government agencies as Russian-English translator-transcribers; three remain at Georgetown pursuing advanced degrees as language instructors, and one is already teaching.

Last fall, the second group took up their studies. Twenty-one young men and women, divided into three sections, are learning Russian, and six are studying German. They have 20 hours of classwork and 10 hours of language laboratory study each week. Upon completion of the course, they, too, will seek jobs as transcribers, translators and teachers.

The idea for this project originated with Louis J. Rives, Jr., himself sightless, who heads the blind services division of the U. S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, which sponsors the Georgetown University effort.

Dr. Leon E. Dostert, director of the program at Georgetown, explains that while the original



Dr. Leon E. Dostert

purpose was to train sightless students to become translators and transcribers, it now has the objective of turning out teachers as well.

"The demand for language translators and teachers, particularly of Russian, is increasing much more rapidly than the supply," Dr. Dostert points out. "This program aims to meet at least part of that demand. In that sense, it is not a charitable act. We are filling an important need in our society."

The program's success begins with careful selection of participants. The original 15 were chosen from among 200 applicants after a series of personal interviews and standard language aptitude tests which were revised for the blind.

To introduce students to their new language, professors devise unique methods of instruction which have proved so successful that Dr. Dostert predicts they might someday be adopted for the sighted as well.

At the first class meeting, introductions using foreign name equivalents serve as a happy ice-breaker. In the Russian class, for example, Alice

becomes Anastasia. But one girl named Jeanette insisted on being called Nina "just because it's pretty." Another was greeted as Susanna Ivanovna.

Early classes emphasize oral-aural instruction. Teachers read aloud in the foreign language and students repeat the words and phrases. The students also listen to tapes prepared by their professors.

"At this point," says Dr. Dostert, "the teachers are the pupils' dictionaries. And the students, not worrying too much about spelling and grammar and not slowed in checking textbooks, pick up proper pronunciation much more quickly than usual."

Next, students are introduced to the Braille alphabet in the language of their study, and to the Russian (or German) typewriter—which, incidentally, is not equipped with Braille-type keys. They practice transcribing spoken language on their typewriters—a skill particularly useful in monitoring foreign broadcasts.

The next step is reading foreign newspapers and magazines. For the Russian students, the newspaper *Pravda*, plus a literary paper and a labor publication, are airmailed from Moscow. In class, professors read articles which the students then discuss in Russian. This not only affords language practice, but introduces them to various aspects of Russian life as well—including treatment of news and propaganda in the press.

Additional familiarity comes from the appearance of Russian-born physicians, lawyers, artists and others now living in this country, as guest lecturers. They not only describe Russian activities in their areas of professional interest, but also get students used to hearing voices other than those of their teachers.

These guest lecturers back up study of Russian (or German) history and geography, and, in the second year of study, literature. Most of this work is done with taped lectures prepared by professors, plus, for pupils of Russian, a Braille magazine received each month from Moscow.

Throughout the two-year course, examinations are given every other week. In addition, a major test comes at the end of each semester. These require students to spend 45 minutes with a professor in discussion and translation, and to present both a prepared talk on an assigned subject and an extemporaneous delivery on another topic selected by the professor.

By the time the students graduate, they speak, translate and transcribe their new language fluently. Says Dr. Dostert, "For the number of hours studied, our first group had a higher level of achievement than a cross section of sighted pupils. The Class average was 93."

Dr. Dostert credits two factors for this accomplishment: the fact that the students were specially selected for their language aptitude, and the ability of the blind to concentrate with-

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out distraction upon oral-aural teaching techniques.

He believes these advantages pave the way for a major development in education of the blind, and hopes that organizations concerned with their problems will become interested in the idea. What Dr. Dostert envisions is creation of a national language institute for the blind. The first two years of instruction, he suggests, would emphasize language with a minimum of general academic study; the second two years would be divided evenly between study of languages and other subjects, and the final year's instruction would be devoted primarily to academic courses.

"The result," says Dr. Dostert, "would be achievement of a Bachelors Degree with very strong language competence."

"In addition to this dream," he continues, "we hope that our program will help show people in other countries a new way to create opportunities for the blind. Our students have proved they can become outstanding translators and teachers. It is our hope that foreign visitors to this country will come to Washington to see how our program works, and

also that such groups as Lions, through its international organizations, will perhaps establish similar projects in countries all over the world."

What is the reaction of the students themselves to this program? Most find it difficult to express it in words, but their enthusiasm speaks for itself. This includes, for example, the assistance offered by Russian students to their professors in compiling a Russian-English Braille dictionary, which eventually will contain approximately twice as many entries as the 7,000 words the students learn in class. It is also evident in the recent inauguration of a hard, voluntary, non-credit seminar to challenge those who complained their classwork is not difficult enough.

The only other complaint concerns a small metal can jingling with pennies collected as fines for English words uttered during class hours. However, the students know that their good-natured griping all about "the bank" does not carry much weight with their professors. "After all," they freely admit, "we have financed several birthday parties with the money."

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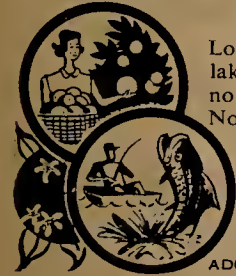
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QUOTES

There is no good in arguing with the inevitable. The only argument available with an east wind is to put on your overcoat.—James Russell Lowell

*

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts, of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.—Henry Thoreau

*

This is a fault common to all singers, that among their friends they never are inclined to sing when they are asked, unasked they never desist.—Horace

*

A house is never still in darkness to those who listen intently; there is a whispering in distant chambers, an unearthly hand presses the snib of the window, the latch rises. Ghosts

were created when the first man woke in the night.—James Barrie

*

The worst obstructionist in any community is not the man who is opposed to doing anything, but the man who will not do what he can because he cannot do what he would like to do.—J. J. Long

*

We are raising a generation that has a woefully small stock of ideas and interests and emotions. It must be amused at all costs but it has little skill in amusing itself. It pays some of its members to do what the majority can no longer do for themselves. It is this inner poverty that makes for the worst kind of boredom.—Robert J. McCracken

*

Government is not reason, it is not eloquence—it is force! Like fire it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master; never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action.—George Washington

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LIONS quiz

Q. While reading THE LION, I noticed that not one Lion pictured was wearing a Lion cap. In our club, I fine Lions for not wearing the headgear. Isn't the wearing of the cap required? And, by the way, is it proper to leave the Lion cap on while the national anthem is being sung?

A. There is no mandatory provision concerning the wearing or non-wearing of a Lions cap. This is a matter which is governed by local custom. The custom seems to have sprung up in the past 15 to 20 years and possibly had its inspiration in wartime uniforms.

It is certainly not proper to wear Lions caps during the singing of a national anthem.

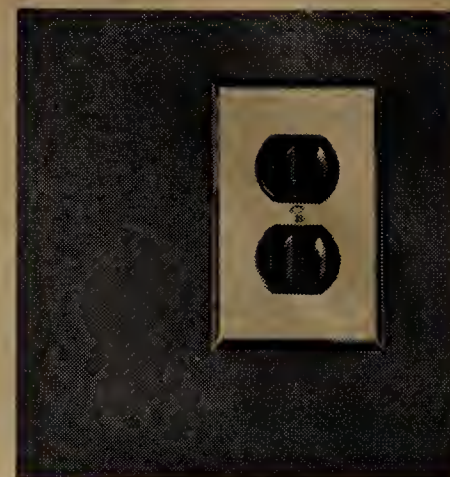
Q. Just how many times a year does the International Board of Directors meet? And does the Board always meet in the current International President's home state?

A. The International Board meets three times each year. One of these trimonthly meetings is traditionally held in the President's state, but they may just as easily be conducted anywhere else in the world of Lionism, as witness last year's Board meeting in Tokyo.

Q. Our club's 25th anniversary was celebrated in January, yet our name was not carried with those of other clubs in THE LION's anniversary department for that month. What's the reason?

A. Your club's name appeared a month earlier. Clubs are listed in the Anniversary department on the basis of their month of organization, rather than other events connected with their beginnings.

If you have an interesting question pertaining to Lionism, send it to QUIZ, Lion Magazine, 209 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois.



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